BLUMEA 53: 233–234
Published on 29 October 2008 http://dx.doi.org/10.3767/000651908X607927

IN MEMORIAM DING HOU (1921 – 2008)

Dr. Ding Hou, much appreciated honorary staff member of the National Herbarium of the Netherlands, passed away on 9 September 2008, victim to cancer. He had been associated with our institute for 52 years, and was active until his hospitalization in early July this year. On the occasion of his 80th birthday in 2001, we wrote a short article in Blumea, entitled 'Dr. Ding Hou 80 years young', *young – not old* – because Ding always looked a few decades younger than his real age and also exhibited an enviably youthful spirit (Baas & Adema 2001).

It was Professor Van Steenis who succeeded in luring Ding Hou away from a promising career in the USA to join his Flora Malesiana team in Leiden in 1956. Ding had first been educated in his home province Kiangsi, China. Following four years as Botanical Assistant in Taiwan he moved to the United States where he obtained his Masters degree and PhD at the famous Washington University in St. Louis, and held research assistantships at the Missouri Botanical Garden. He married his fiancée Sue-Ying Liu in the Leiden Town Hall on 8 August 1957, chaperoned by Professor Van Steenis and Miss Lilian Perry (co-worker of the famous Dr. E.D. Merrill) from America. We have in the personalia collection of the NHN Library lovely pictures of the beautiful and happy young couple.

Ding's contributions to the Flora Malesiana project were very impressive: he revised seven families (Lut 2001), and actively contributed to the scientific collection management up to the day of his hospitalization.



Ding Hou and his wife Sue in 2006.

We will remember Ding not only as a great and productive plant taxonomist, but especially as a very dear friend and truly good person with as outstanding characteristics: modesty, politeness, helpfulness, good cheer and subtle sense of humour.

As a very modest person he never wanted to be put in the limelight. That modesty may have been one of the reasons why he did not want to have visits from his colleagues during his stay in hospital. His often expressed gratitude to have been granted an office as honorary staff of the Rijksherbarium, later the National Herbarium of the Netherlands was another sign of his modesty: it ignored the fact that for our institute it was a well-understood self interest to have such a great taxonomist as Ding Hou doing voluntary work.

Politeness in the extreme characterised Ding's attitude to all his friends and colleagues. Nobody ever succeeded to let Ding pass through a door before him- or herself. It could take a very long time to get through the many doors in the Herbarium with him, shadow fighting to allow each other first right of way. Ding could, however, also use this politeness to decisively dismiss some requests: often when Max van Balgooy would bring him unknown plants suspected to belong to the so-called 'Ding Hou Families' Ding would comment: "Very good material, but not my family" or "If this is my family, it is new: you describe it".

Helpfulness and kindness came in many forms: small gifts and a keen interest in the personal well-being of all people who ever assisted him with his herbarium collections or in any other way. He spent endless hours in helping colleagues to translate and interpret Chinese texts and plant names. Foreign guests could rely on his assistance to get round on the right buses. He could give marvellous tourist advice, because he himself and his wife were connoisseurs of all major attractions in Holland, especially Floral and Fruit Processions. Many of his colleagues abroad are currently reacting to the sad news of his death each with a special memory of Ding's kindness to them.

Ding was always very cheerful, although in the last few years he could be rather silent. He told lovely stories, interspersed with jokes about his numerous experiences with assorted famous botanists.

When we wrote our congratulatory paper on the occasion of Ding's 80th birthday, we thought that he would be destined for a very long life well into his nineties. The last year, however, we did see clear signs of ageing, probably aggravated by the cancer that was only diagnosed recently. It is difficult for us to imagine the Herbarium without his cheerful and helpful presence.

During the cremation ceremony on 12 September, Ding's widow gave a moving and courageous address. She recalled Ding's years in China as a young orphan (his father was a general, killed in the Chinese civil war of 1928), his formative years in the USA where his PhD supervisor taught him to dig deep, and Ding's great satisfaction to work in Leiden with the Flora Malesiana Team and the extended Herbarium Family. We wish her much strength to cope with this great loss.

PIETER BAAS & FRITS ADEMA

References:

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